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ABSTRACT

The overall goal of the 3M company in terms of the language training of its employees is to prepare individuals to be able to carry on everyday business on an international level and to develop employees who have both language skills and awareness of other cultures. The 3M Language Society consists basically of conversational language courses for employees who want to learn or refresh language skills. A hosting program gives American families the opportunity to have business visitors from various countries live in their homes, to the linguistic and cultural benefit of both. Other social activities are designed for cultural education. Specific language needs in industry include: (1) the ability to conduct seminars and talks in the language of a given country, rather than in English, (2) product knowledge to go along with language capability and the development of specialized terminology, (3) glossaries of specialized terms, (4) employee publications for overseas employees, (5) language tutoring, and (6) basic language skills enabling teachers to interact with the children of foreign families in their native language. (CLK)

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THE NEED FOR AND USES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN A BUSINESS CAREER

by

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(The following is a condensation of an address delivered at the MCTFL Fall Conference, held on October 17 at Kellogg Sr. High, by Esther Piper, Director of the 3M Language School, St. Paul.)

While our topic "Careers Through Foreign Language Study" sounds interesting and intriguing, the use to which your students will put their foreign language training depends very much upon the other career subjects they take along with that foreign language study.

Simply stated, foreign language is a communication skill, a tool, a valuable asset, that will aid in the transmission of ideas from people of one nationality to people of another nationality. The important question for us at 3M is: Does he/she have the ability to communicate in French, German, Italian, or Spanish (or any other language we teach in Minnesota) using business or technical terms? If all we wanted was someone to speak French, we could hire any French national. But suppose we want to know about the only successful use of tidal power, the facility at the Rance River Estuary near St. Malo in Brittany, France? Many things would determine the effectiveness of this communication:

1. Language proficiency and use of specialized vocabulary by the transmitter, in this case a French engineer.
2. His knowledge of the subject matter.
3. His means of communication — French or English.
4. The same 3 points as above, but referring to the receiver, the American.
5. The American's willingness to learn.

We usually think of Americans transmitting information and "foreigners" being receivers. This is no longer so, as evidenced by the increased numbers of foreign patents being issued, technical publications being circulated in our companies today, or by the numbers of foreign nationals coming here for extended periods of time to bring us their technologies and to exchange ideas. Only a small fraction of resource materials from other countries is ever translated into English, and then only in capsule form. Business and technical libraries have access to volumes of resource materials of all kinds. Engineers and technical people could profit from a better understanding of what others are doing.

The 3M Language Society

I would like you to consider with me a little different slant to the same basic subject, namely "The Need For and Uses of Foreign Languages in a Business Career," specifically a business career with a multi-national company, such as 3M. It was the recognition of this need that prompted a handful of employees in 1965 to meet at lunchtime to speak German, because one of those present wanted to recall college German before making a business trip abroad. No one present that day realized the significance of that initial meeting until much later, as more people and more languages became involved.

Soon others wanted to recall their high school or college training until finally the program encompasses ten languages with many different levels of achievement. Today it serves not only those who need to refresh their knowledge of languages, but also for those who never have studied a language at all.

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Seventy-five employees, many of them nationals from other countries, or some, like my husband and myself, who have lived overseas for extended periods, share our knowledge and experience, without pay, to teach our fellow 3Mers in noontime classes the languages and cultures that we have learned. Our approach is conversational; our texts are designed to encourage self-help. We have evening classes for those who want to move at a faster pace. Outside study is encouraged; homework is assigned and corrected.

Through our "hosting" program, our students have an opportunity to practice the languages they are learning. Based on a questionnaire, we match an international business visitor and a prospective host family as to interests. The visitor has a chance to see ordinary family life in the U.S., and can draw his own conclusions rather than accept stereotyped ideas gained from the movies or from ill-mannered tourists abroad. Some of the groups we have hosted have been foreign diplomats to the U.S. or the U.N. Our host families have visited some of their own former guests in their home countries. With their newly-acquired language capability, they no longer have to stay on English speaking guided tours but can get out to see some of the country off the tourist track and even carry on limited conversations; all this contributes to a better understanding in person-to-person contact.

Our Festival Evenings focus on the food, music, entertainment and culture related to each of our languages. In the three such Festivals each year, we go to great lengths to recreate the atmosphere that exists in a particular area. We are fortunate that nationals of the countries are interested in showing different aspects of their culture. Sometimes they help us with the preparation of food at the 3M Employees' recreation center at Tartan Park; at other times they plan a special menu which is prepared by a local restaurant.

We will celebrate our 10th anniversary as an organized Society in March 1976. So far we have held 27 Festivals. If we assume that only 50% of our 650 members each year continue with us, over this 10-year period we have touched the lives of some 3,000 3Mers and their families.

We are in no way trying to usurp your jobs as teachers of foreign languages. Instead, we are trying, as stated in our Constitution, "to encourage and improve communication and international understanding through educational programs in the languages and cultures of all nations; to promote interest in AND knowledge of languages, thereby fostering the personal and professional skills of the employees of the 3M Company; and extending support to the 3M Company in matters of international communication."

Need For Language Expertise

A person being considered for an overseas assignment is evaluated first on his expertise in the job. Until very recently the fact that one had some language experience was only of mild interest. But when, in the performance of an overseas job, the individual was found to be much more productive because of a language background, it became a more important consideration. A person does not normally earn more money simply for having studied a language; but he does earn more, because of his ability to obtain better results.

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1. An American scientist who speaks some Italian can put on a much more effective, and better-attended, seminar in Italy if the message is presented in Italian, rather than insisting that it be given in English. Using an interpreter is often unsatisfactory, because one cannot find interpreters with product knowledge and specialized terminology to go along with his language capabilities; it is impossible to explain something in another language if you cannot explain it in your own.

2. In translating, as in interpreting, there is a need for product knowledge to go along with language capability and the development of specialized terminology. To be truly effective, the translator needs continually to study his company's product literature in the languages he is using. A few years ago a translator looking up a word in a Spanish dictionary said the definition "sprinkle" or "dewdrops" didn't make sense. When he inquired as to the product line, we were told "adhesives." That word was like a flash of light to me, since that had been my husband's product line for 17 years. SPRAY ADHESIVES, of course. She knew Spanish; I knew the product terminology, and together we came up with the correct word.

Another person in a recent translation came across the French word "gaine," which usually means "girdle" or "covering." In electrical parlance it has the specialized meaning of "insulation." Imagine the hilarious results if the more common meaning were used!

3. Technology has advanced so fast over the past two decades that dictionaries cannot keep up. Words are coined that have no relation to their classic dictionary definitions. We are developing our own 3M GLOSSARIES OF SPECIALIZED TERMS, another need of industry. When we approached our veteran international traveling staff about glossaries, they were apathetic, to say the least. But as time went on, product lines got deeper, and the needs for penetration through the lower levels of management to the working levels became more necessary. Requests for our Glossaries increased on both sides of the ocean. Any 3Mer who comes across a specific term for a particular product can note it and help to build that product glossary.

4. Most worldwide companies have employee publications in other languages for overseas employees. These might be a source of material in the current idiom for high school classes which might be explored more fully by teachers.

5. With people moving from one country to another, the need for tutoring is greater than ever. In assigning a tutor, consideration must also be given to the culture of the student's country.

6. Another need of industry is help in the schools when non-English speaking children of our families from other countries, here on special temporary assignment, have difficulties in the classroom. How many of your nonlanguage teaching colleagues learn even a few words of the child's language so they can at least greet them in the morning as they do the other children? You can help to fill a need of industry by making your colleagues aware of the problem, and by working with the PTA's of your community to correct an "out-of-awareness" situation.

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The needs we have been discussing are not abstract ideas. They are the needs that come to my attention every day in my work as Language Coordinator for 3M, a position I have held for nearly 8 years. We serve as a focal point for all language services — matching language capability with product and professional knowledge to meet tutoring, translating and interpreting needs; we seek, train and direct instructional activities; we assist our subsidiaries in their language and cultural programs, and we serve as advisors to other companies wishing to set up similar programs.

Right now 3M has operations in 38 countries; 40% of our business is done outside the U.S. Communication in other languages is 3M business. Did you know that one out of every 7 U.S. jobs at 3M is directly due to our overseas operations? The success of the whole 3M operation, in St. Paul, in Minnesota, and elsewhere affects the financial health of the community where installations are located, and it affects the "quality of life" of every person in those communities.

Our overall goal is to prepare our people for an opportunity to carry on our everyday business in a worldwide company, to work with international visitors and business people, to be capable of taking an overseas assignment if desired, to create a body of 3Mers who have developed some language skills and some awareness of other peoples.

If you can work in new and innovative ways to show your students, and through them their parents, the necessity of learning languages to communicate with and understand peoples of other countries — and if we in industry work to show our needs to our employees and, through them their children — we can, together, successfully expand the limited vision of many people who still do not realize that the physical well-being of our citizens and the financial well-being of our country is linked to all the countries of the world.

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